



Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

September 2009 (2553)

Resolve

BY STEPHEN BATCHELOR

Reprinted (with modifications) from
Buddhism Without Beliefs (New York, NY:
Riverhead Books [1997]), pp. 39—44

*When crows find a dying snake, they behave as if
they were eagles. When I see myself as a victim, I
am hurt by trifling failures.*

— Śāntideva

Life is neither meaningful nor meaningless.
Meaning and its absence are given to life by
language and imagination. We are linguistic
beings who inhabit a reality in which it makes
sense to make sense.

For life to make sense, it needs purpose.
Even if our aim in life is to be totally in the here
and now, free from past conditioning and any idea
of a goal to be reached, we still have a clear
purpose, without which life would be
meaningless. A purpose is formed by words and
images, and we can no more step out of language
and imagination than we can step out of our
bodies.



The problem is not that we lack resolve, but that it
so often turns out to be misplaced. The meaning-
laden feelings do not last. We resolve to become
wealthy and famous, only to discover in the end
that such things are incapable of providing that
permanent well-being we initially projected onto
them. Wealth and success are all very good; but,
once we have them, their allure fades. It is like

climbing a mountain. We expend great energy and
hope on reaching the top, only to find when we get
there that it is dwarfed by another even higher
ridge.

In a changing, ambitious world, is anything
worthy of total commitment? It is tempting to
appeal to a purpose-giving God outside of time
and space, a transcendent Absolute in which
ultimate meaning is secured. But is this appeal not
an urge for the consolation of religion? Is it not
falling prey to fear and ignorance? Dharma
practice starts not with belief in a transcendent
reality but through embracing the suffering
experienced in an uncertain world.

A purpose may be no more than a set of
images and words, but we can still be totally
committed to it. Such resolve entails aspiration,
appreciation, and conviction — I aspire to awaken,
I appreciate its value, and I am convinced that it is
possible. This is a focused act that encompasses
the whole person. Aspiration is as much a bodily
longing as an intellectual desire; appreciation as
much a passion as a preference; conviction as
much an intuition as a rational conclusion.

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- Dhamma study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the Dhamma, based primarily on Pali sources.
2. To promote practice of the Dhamma in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the Dhamma, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pali language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Group

An on-going Dhamma study group focusing on the booklet *The Essential Teachings of Buddhism* is meeting on irregular Sunday mornings at 11:00 o'clock at the home of Jason and Vanessa Widener (892 East Estates Blvd., West Ashley, SC 29414). Call (843) 628-7833 for the date and time of the next meeting and for directions to Jason's home. There is no fee to participate in this group. ■

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Irrespective of the purpose to which we are committed, when such feelings are aroused, life is infused with meaning.



Suffering emerges from craving for life to be other than it is. In the face of a changing world, such craving seeks consolation in something permanent and reliable, in a self that is in control of things, in a God who is in charge of destiny. The irony of this strategy is that it turns out to be the cause of what it seeks to dispel. In yearning for suffering to be alleviated in such ways, we reinforce what creates suffering in the first place — the craving for life to be other than the way it is. We find ourselves spinning in a vicious circle. The more acute the suffering, the more we want to be rid of it, but the more we want to be rid of it, the more acute it becomes.

Such behavior is not just a silly mistake we can shrug off. It is an ingrained habit, an addiction. It persists even when we are aware of its self-destructive nature. To counter it requires resolve of equivalent force to live in another way. A smoker may fervently resolve to give up cigarettes and, indeed, succeed at doing so, but that does not prevent the tug of longing to appear each time that he enters a smoke-filled room. What changes is his resolve.

Dharma practice is founded on resolve. This is not an emotional conversion, a devastating realization of the error of our ways, a desperate urge to be good, but an ongoing heartfelt reflection on priorities, values, and purpose. We need to keep taking stock of our life in an unsentimental, uncompromising way.



Someone might say: “I resolve to awaken, to practice a way of life conducive to that end, and to cultivate friendships that nurture it”, but he may feel exactly the opposite much of the time. We are often content to drift from day to day, follow

routines, indulge habits, and hang out, dimly aware of the background echo of our deeper resolve. We know this is insincere, unsatisfying — yet we still do it. Even in meditation, we may go through the mechanics of practice, lapse into fantasies, get bored, or become self-righteous and pious.

Awakening is the purpose that enfolds all purposes. Whatever we do is meaningful to the extent that it leads to awakening, meaningless to the extent that it leads away from it. Dharma practice is the process of awakening itself — the thoughts, words, and deeds that weave the unfolding fabric of experience into a coherent whole. And this process is participatory — sustained and matured by communities of friendships.

The process of awakening is like walking on a footpath. When we find such a path after hours of struggling through the undergrowth, we know at last that we are heading somewhere. Moreover, we suddenly find that we can move freely without obstruction. We settle into a rhythmic and easy pace. At the same time, we are reconnected to others — men and women who have walked here before us. The path is maintained as a path only because of the tread of feet. Just as others have created this path for us, so, by walking on it, we maintain it for those who will come after us. What counts is not so much the destination but the resolve to take the next step.

Treading the path of awakening can embrace a range of purposes. At times, we may concentrate on the specifics of material existence — pursuing a livelihood that is in accord with our deepest values and aspirations. At times, we may withdraw — disentangling ourselves from social and psychological pressures in order to reconsider our life in a quiet and supportive setting. At times, we may engage with the world — responding empathetically and creatively to the suffering of others.

There is no hierarchy among these purposes; one is not “better” than the other; we do not “progress” from one to the next. They each have their time and place. If we seek inner detachment and clarity while our outer life is a

mess, we may enjoy periodic escapes from turmoil but find no lasting equanimity. If we devote ourselves to the welfare of the world while our inner life is riven with irrational ideals and unresolved compulsions, we can easily undermine our own resolve.



Commitment to the most worthy purpose is of little value if we lack confidence in our ability to realize it. We may console ourselves with the idea that, at some future time, awakening will dawn as a reward for having believed long enough. This is to literalize purpose — to confuse a valuable aim with an entity endowed with a shadowy, meta-physical existence. The longing for consolation might run deeper than we like to admit. It enables us to feel good about ourselves without having to do a great deal. But can we afford the luxury of consolation in a world where death is the only certainty, its time utterly uncertain, and the hereafter a rather shaky hypothesis?

A commitment to Dharma practice keeps us on our toes. We can notice when our resolve eases into complacent routine and observe how we seek to justify ourselves by seeking approval from others. We can be conscious of how we tend to ignore or escape suffering rather than understand and accept it. We can be aware that, even when we gain insight into these things, we rarely behave differently in the future. Despite our overt resolve, we are still creatures of habit.

Resolve is activated by self-confidence, which, in turn, depends upon the kind of self-image we have. If we see ourselves as insignificant, always in the shadow of others, then the slightest hardship will seem daunting. We will be drawn to those who insist that awakening is a distant goal, accessible to only a privileged few. Conversely, if we see ourselves as superior to others, then, while outwardly disdainful of hardship, we are tormented by humiliation when it defeats us. We will shun the friendship of others who might help dispel the conceit that traps us in yet another cycle of suffering.

Self-confidence is not a form of arrogance. It is trust in our capacity to awaken. It is both the courage to face whatever life throws at us without losing equanimity, and the humility to treat every situation we encounter as one from which we can learn. ■

The Biocentric Universe

**A radical new view of reality:
Life creates time, space, and the cosmos itself.**

BY ROBERT LANZA AND BOB BERMAN

The farther we peer into space, the more we realize that the nature of the universe cannot be understood fully by inspecting spiral galaxies or watching distant supernovas. It lies deeper. It lies within ourselves.

This insight snapped into focus one day while one of us (Lanza) was walking through the woods. Looking up, he saw a huge golden orb web spider tethered to the overhead boughs. There the creature sat on a single thread, reaching out across its web to detect the vibrations of a trapped insect struggling to escape. The spider surveyed its universe, but everything beyond that gossamer pinwheel was incomprehensible. The human observer seemed as far-off to the spider as telescopic objects seem to us. Yet there was something kindred: We humans, too, lie at the heart of a great web of space and time whose threads are connected according to laws that dwell in our minds.

Is the web possible without the spider? Are space and time physical objects that would continue to exist even if living creatures were removed from the scene?

Figuring out the nature of the real world has obsessed scientists and philosophers for millennia. Three hundred years ago, the Irish empiricist George Berkeley contributed a particularly prescient observation: The only thing

we can perceive are our perceptions. In other words, consciousness is a matrix upon which the cosmos is apprehended. Color, sound, temperature, and the like exist only as perceptions in our head, not as absolute essences. In the broadest sense, we cannot be sure of an outside universe at all.

For centuries, scientists regarded Berkeley's argument as a philosophical side-show and continued to build physical models based on the assumption of a separate universe "out there" into which we have each individually arrived. These models presume the existence of one essential reality that prevails with us or without us. Yet, since the 1920s, quantum physics experiments have routinely shown the opposite: Results do depend on whether anyone is observing. This is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the two-slit experiment. When someone watches a subatomic particle or a bit of light pass through slits, the particle behaves like a bullet, passing through one hole or the other. But if no one observes the particle, it exhibits the behavior of a wave that can inhabit all possibilities — including somehow passing through both holes at the same time.

Some of the greatest physicists have described these results as so confounding they are impossible to comprehend fully, beyond the reach of metaphor, visualization, and language itself. But there is another interpretation that makes them sensible. Instead of assuming a reality that predates life and even creates it, we propose a biocentric picture of reality. From this point of view, life — particularly consciousness — creates the universe, and the universe could not exist without us.

Messing With the Light

Quantum mechanics is the physicist's most accurate model for describing the world of the atom. But it also makes some of the most persuasive arguments that conscious perception is integral to the workings of the universe. Quantum theory tells us that an unobserved small object (for

example, an electron or a photon — a particle of light) exists only in a blurry, unpredictable state, with no well-defined location or motion until the moment that it is observed. This is Werner Heisenberg's famous "uncertainty principle." Physicists describe the phantom, not-yet-manifest condition as a wave function, a mathematical expression used to find the probability that a particle will appear at any given place. When a property of an electron suddenly switches from possibility to reality, some physicists say that its wave function has collapsed.

What accomplishes this collapse? Messing with it. Hitting it with a bit of light in order to take its picture. Just looking at it does the job. Experiments suggest that mere knowledge in the experimenter's mind is sufficient to collapse a wave function and convert possibility into reality. When particles are created as a pair — for instance, two electrons in a single atom that move or spin together — physicists call them "entangled." Due to their intimate connection, entangled particles share a wave function. When we measure one particle and thus collapse its wave function, the other particle's wave function instantaneously collapses too. If one photon is observed to have a vertical polarization (its waves all moving in one plane), the act of observation causes the other to go instantly from being an indefinite probability wave to an actual photon with the opposite, horizontal polarity — even if the two photons have since moved far from each other.

In 1997, University of Geneva physicist Nicolas Gisin sent two entangled photons zooming along optical fibers until they were seven miles apart. One photon then hit a two-way mirror where it had a choice: either to bounce off or go through. Detectors recorded what it randomly did. But whatever action it took, its entangled twin always performed the complementary action. The communication between the two happened at least 10,000 times faster than the speed of light. It seems that quantum news travels instantaneously, limited by no external constraints — not even the speed of light. Since then, other researchers have duplicated and refined Gisin's work. Today, no

location of a subatomic particle inherently blurs its momentum and vice versa.

All of this makes perfect sense from a biocentric perspective. Everything we perceive is actively and repeatedly being reconstructed inside our heads in an organized whirl of information. Time, in this sense, can be defined as the summation of spatial states occurring inside the mind. So what is real? If the next mental image is different from the last, then it is different, period. We can award that change with the word “time,” but that does not mean that there is an actual invisible matrix in which changes occur. That is just our way of making sense of things. We watch our loved ones age and die and assume that an external entity called “time” is responsible for the crime.

There is a peculiar intangibility to space as well. We cannot pick it up and bring it into the laboratory. Like time, space is neither physical nor fundamentally real in our view. Rather, it is a node of interpretation and understanding. It is part of an animal’s mental software that molds sensations into multidimensional objects.

Most of us still think like Newton, regarding space as sort of a vast container that has no walls. But our notion of space is false. Shall we count the ways? (1) Distances between objects mutate depending on conditions like gravity and velocity, as described by Einstein’s relativity, so that there is no absolute distance between anything and anything else. (2) Empty space, as described by quantum mechanics, is, in fact, not empty but full of potential particles and fields. (3) Quantum theory even casts doubt on the notion that distant objects are truly separated, since entangled particles can act in unison even if separated by the width of a galaxy.

Unlocking the Cage

In daily life, space and time are harmless illusions. A problem arises only because, by treating these as fundamental and independent things, science picks a completely wrong starting point for investigations into the nature of reality.

Most researchers still believe that they can build from one side of nature, the physical, without the other side, the living. By inclination and training, these scientists are obsessed with mathematical descriptions of the world. If only, after leaving work, they would look out with equal seriousness over a pond and watch the schools of minnows rise to the surface. The fish, the ducks, and the cormorants, paddling out beyond the pads and cattails, are all part of the greater answer.

Recent quantum studies help illustrate what a new biocentric science would look like. Just months ago, Nicolas Gisin announced a new twist on his entanglement experiment; in this case, he thinks the results could be visible to the naked eye. At the University of Vienna, Anton Zeilinger’s work with huge molecules called “buckyballs” pushes quantum reality closer to the macroscopic world. In an exciting extension of this work — proposed by Roger Penrose, the renowned Oxford physicist —, not just light but a small mirror that reflects it become part of an entangled quantum system, one that is billions of times larger than a buckyball. If the proposed experiment ends up confirming Penrose’s idea, it would also confirm that quantum effects apply to human-scale objects.

Biocentrism should unlock the cages in which Western science has unwittingly confined itself. Allowing the observer into the equation should open new approaches to understanding cognition, from unraveling the nature of consciousness to developing thinking machines that experience the world the same way we do. Biocentrism should also provide a stronger basis for solving problems associated with quantum physics and the Big Bang. Accepting space and time as forms of animal sense perception (that is, as biological), rather than as external physical objects, offers a new way of understanding everything from the microworld (for instance, the reason for strange results in the two-slit experiment) to the forces, constants, and laws that shape the universe. At a minimum, it should help halt such dead-end efforts as string theory.

Above all, biocentrism offers a more promising way to bring together all of physics, as

one questions the immediate nature of this connectedness between bits of light or matter, or even entire clusters of atoms.

Before these experiments, most physicists believed in an objective, independent universe. They still clung to the assumption that physical states exist in some absolute sense before they are measured.

All of this is now gone for keeps.

Wrestling with Goldilocks

The strangeness of quantum theory is far from the only argument against the old model of reality. There is also the matter of the fine-tuning of the cosmos. Many fundamental traits, forces, and physical constants — like the charge of an electron or the strength of gravity — make it appear as if everything about the physical state of the universe were tailor-made for life. Some researchers call this revelation the “Goldilocks principle,” because the cosmos is not “too this” or “too that” but, rather, “just right” for life.

At the moment, there are only four explanations for this mystery. The first two give us little to work with from a scientific perspective. One is simply to argue for incredible coincidence. Another is to say, “God did it,” which explains nothing even if it is true.

The third explanation invokes a concept called the “anthropic principle,” first articulated by Cambridge astrophysicist Brandon Carter in 1973. This principle holds that we must find the right conditions for life in the universe, because, if such life did not exist, we would not be here to find those conditions. Some cosmologists have tried to wed the anthropic principle with the recent theories that suggest that our universe is just one of a vast multitude of universes, each with its own physical laws. Through sheer numbers, then, it would not be surprising that one of these universes would have the right qualities for life. But so far, there is no direct evidence whatsoever for other universes.

The final option is biocentrism, which holds that the universe is created by life and not

the other way around. This is an explanation for and an extension of the participatory anthropic principle described by the physicist John Wheeler, a disciple of Einstein’s who coined the terms “wormhole” and “black hole.”

Seeking Space and Time

Even the most fundamental elements of physical reality, space and time, strongly support a biocentric basis for the cosmos.

According to biocentrism, time does not exist independently of the life that notices it. The reality of time has long been questioned by an odd alliance of philosophers and physicists. The former argue that the past exists only as ideas in the mind, which themselves are neuroelectrical events occurring strictly in the present moment. Physicists, for their part, note that all of their working models, from Isaac Newton’s laws through quantum mechanics, do not actually describe the nature of time. The real point is that no actual entity of time is needed, nor does it play a role in any of their equations. When they speak of time, they inevitably describe it in terms of change. But change is not the same thing as time.

To measure anything’s position precisely, at any given instant, is to lock in on one static frame of its motion, as in the frame of a film. Conversely, as soon as you observe a movement, you cannot isolate a frame, because motion is the summation of many frames. Sharpness in one parameter induces blurriness in the other. Imagine that you are watching a film of an archery tournament. An archer shoots, and the arrow flies. The camera follows the arrow’s trajectory from the archer’s bow toward the target. Suddenly, the projector stops on a single frame of a stilled arrow. You stare at the image of an arrow in mid-flight. The pause in the film enables you to know the position of the arrow with great accuracy, but you have lost all information about its momentum. In that frame, it is going nowhere; its path and velocity are no longer known. Such fuzziness brings us back to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which describes how measuring the

scientists have been trying to do since Einstein's unsuccessful unified field theories of eight decades ago. Until we recognize the essential role of biology, our attempts to truly unify the universe will remain a train to nowhere. ■

Reprinted from *Discover* magazine, May 2009, pp. 53—55. Adapted from: Robert Lanza with Bob Berman, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness Are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe* (BenBella Books [May 2009]). This article has been lightly edited here.

Buddhist Ethics

Beneath this world of changing phenomena, there is a changeless reality. This changeless reality can be realized by any human being. There are spiritual disciplines, very difficult and demanding, that provide the means to realize this other reality. These disciplines are not just to be studied, read, or heard — they are to be practiced. The practice of these disciplines brings out what is best in human beings physically, mentally, intellectually, and spiritually. In Buddhism, these spiritual disciplines consist of training in morality, meditation, and wisdom.

Buddhism possesses an excellent code of morality consisting of:

The Five Precepts: (1) not to kill, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit sexual misconduct, (4) not to engage in false speech, and (5) not to indulge in intoxicating drinks or drugs causing heedlessness;

The Four Sublime States, also called the four “divine abidings”: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity;

The Transcendental Virtues, or *pāramitās*, of which there are ten in the Theravādin tradition and six in the Mahāyāna tradition: the ten transcendental virtues of the Theravādin tradition are: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience,

truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity;

The Noble Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Thoughts, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

All Buddhists are expected to lead a noble and useful life.

Buddhism offers one way of life to Monks and Nuns and another to lay followers. Bound by a strict set of rules and regulations, Monks and Nuns devote their entire lives to study, practice, and service, while lay followers, guided by Buddhist principles, serve not only their religion but also their country and the world in their own way. The monastic life offers its members not only a blameless means of livelihood but also structure, discipline, tradition, and communal support.

For Buddhist monks in the Theravādin tradition, the training in morality consists of the observance of 227 rules, while Buddhist monks in the Chinese tradition follow 250 rules, and, in the Tibetan tradition, 253 rules. Buddhist nuns must follow additional rules. The collection of these rules is called the *Pāṭimokkha* in Pāli, that is, the “Code of Conduct” or “Disciplinary Rules,” and is a part of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

Lay practitioners observe five rules of moral training, the so-called “five precepts”. In any kind of spiritual development, we need to establish our practice on moral principles so that we feel self-respect and stability. The training rules provide a guide that we can use for behavior in our daily lives, and they provide the foundation for the practice of meditation and the attainment of wisdom.

The Five Precepts

Formal entry onto the Buddhist Path involves a short ceremony called “Refuge Ordination”. During this ceremony, one makes a

commitment to the “Three Jewels” — the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha — and also commits to make a determined effort to observe five rules of ethical behavior. These rules are called the Five Precepts. The Five Precepts are:

1. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life;
2. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not freely given;
3. I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct;
4. I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech;
5. I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.

Note that these are called “training rules” and not “commandments”, since we are making a commitment to train ourselves to live a moral and ethical life by bringing mental, physical, and verbal actions under control and in line with the Teachings of the Buddha.

The Four Sublime States

The practice of the four Sublime States or “Divine Abidings” (loving-kindness; compassion; appreciative, or sympathetic, joy; and equanimity) brings two blessings: harmony within and peace with other people. Their importance in Buddhist practice cannot be over-emphasized. They are the educators of the heart and the emotions, and, from a Buddhist point of view, there is nothing nobler than living a life that is loving, kind, compassionate, gentle, and non-aggressive.

A person who puts the four Divine Abidings into practice shows that his aggressive tendencies have been tamed by the Dharma.

The Nature of the Teachings

The Teachings of the Buddha are perhaps the only religious teachings that requires no belief in traditions nor in certain historical events. They

appeal solely to the understanding of each individual. For, wherever there are beings capable of thinking, there the truths proclaimed by the Buddha may be understood and realized, without regard to race, country, nationality, or position in society. These truths are universal, not bound up with any particular country or any particular epoch. And, in everyone, even in the lowliest, there lies latent the capacity for seeing and realizing these truths and attaining to the Highest Perfection. And, whosoever lives a noble life, such a one has already tasted the truth and, in greater or lesser degree, travels on the Eightfold Path of Peace, which all noble and holy ones have trodden, tread now, and shall tread in the future. The universal laws of morality hold good without variation everywhere, in all times, and for all beings, whether or not one may call oneself a Buddhist. ■



Gilded standing Buddha (Burmese).

Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

Membership

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship encourages sincere practitioners to become members and to become active in promoting and supporting the activities of the organization. Members receive mailings and the right to participate in programs sponsored by the organization. Members also receive free copies of all educational material produced by the organization. Though there are absolutely no dues or other fees required to become a member of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship, voluntary contributions are accepted. These donations help support the on-going activities of the organization and help cover operating expenses such as producing, printing, and mailing notices of events, cost of preparing and producing educational material, etc. ■

Membership Form:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

Home phone: _____

E-mail: _____

State: _____

ZIP: _____

Return forms to: Charleston Buddhist Fellowship ♦ 940 Rutledge Avenue ♦ Charleston, SC 29403-3206

CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP
940 Rutledge Avenue ♦ Charleston, SC 29403

